

"Provide Atonement, O LORD for your People"

In today's age we often think about our individuality. We like to think about how we stand or fall based on what we individually do or don't do. And yet we have to acknowledge that the decisions of others do have an impact on our lives as well.

Just think of 9/11. None of us were there. I don't think anyone here lost an immediate loved one in that atrocity. And yet the mere mention of 9/11 probably evokes some serious emotion in you. You might feel deeply passionate about the evil that took place. The events of 9/11 probably left a permanent mark on you. Something that happened on the other side of the country affected you. That's partly because you're a human, and what atrocities against humans caused by humans, affects us all. But you are probably especially connected with this if you are an American, since this was directed specifically toward Americans. Of course, the tensions that exist between America and these terrorists probably have had very little to do with your own personal actions. And yet our connectedness with fellow Americans and our history has an impact on us all.

This reminds us that what happens in our life isn't always based on what you individually do. We often bear the consequences of other people's actions that we find ourselves connected with. If our government decides to go to war, you could be drafted and sent whether you want to go or not. Parents, if your child breaks something in a store, you'll probably be the one to pay for it. Children, if you parents decide to move, you'll be going with them. Employees, if your boss makes a good business decision, you might get a promotion and raise; if they make a bad one, you might get laid off. The decisions and actions of others we are connected with, have ramifications to us.

I wanted to get us thinking about this, because of a subject raised in this passage. This passage raises the subject of corporate guilt. It talks about how to address the case of an unsolved murder, lest Israel as a nation incur guilt. This is probably not something we think about too much. Frankly, it can be a hard one to think about because we are probably used to thinking about guilt and innocence so specifically in terms of the individual. That's generally correct. And yet as we already mentioned, the actions of others who are closely connected with us often affect us. For reasons we'll discuss, this was particularly true with Israel in the old covenant. Yet there are also extensions of this same principle for us to consider as Christians under the new covenant. So today we'll think first about what the Bible says about corporate guilt with Israel, especially as seen in this passage. Then we'll think about some ways to apply this to us in our new covenant context.

So let's think through this idea of corporate guilt a bit. It might be helpful to start by mentioning that this is something seen from time to time in the Bible, most specifically with Israel in the Old Testament. A first example though applies very generally. Think of the doctrine of original sin. The Bible says that each of us are guilty because of Adam's first sin. Now the Bible also tells us that we all go on to incur additional guilt by the sins each of us personally commit. We show ourselves to be like Adam.

And yet the Bible tells us that we are all guilty because of Adam's first sin, Romans 5, for example. Original sin and guilt is something unique in itself, but it certainly has an aspect of corporate guilt. The actions of Adam and Eve have incurred guilt on all of us.

Looking more specifically at Israel's history, you have laws in the Torah like this passage here that hold out the threat of corporate guilt. Think of the example of Achan in Joshua 7. He disobeyed God's command to not keep any of the spoil from a battle, and it resulted in God's anger against all of Israel. Or if you read 2 Samuel 21:1 it describes how there was a famine for three years in the land because of bloodguilt incurred by Saul for unjustly killing the Gibeonites. These are examples of corporate guilt in Israel's history.

I think in Israel's case these vivid examples of corporate guilt are especially related to their special status. They were a very unique people, as God called them to be a holy nation living in a holy land. God called them to live in outward holiness and purity. That explains all the vast ceremonial laws of cleanness that Israel had to follow. They were to be a sort of picture or foreshadowing of heaven where God's people live in complete holiness and purity. In heaven, of course, we know that God's people will live in complete holiness, without sin.

And yet this especially explains why God was so zealous for Israel to enforce holiness among the people. If someone killed someone intentionally, they had to be put to death themselves. That would be keeping the visible purity of this holy nation. This unique corporate position of Israel is something very important in the book of Deuteronomy. The book mentions in numerous places the promise of earthly blessings and the threat of earthly curses. If the nation as a whole kept the covenant, they'd receive abundant earthly blessings. If the nation as a whole didn't keep the covenant, they'd receive devastating earthly curses. Certainly when the nation as a whole faced curses, there was still a holy remnant among Israel that remained true to God. But they would have tasted of the consequences of the people's sin. So, you see that there is this sense that the holy standing of the Israel demanded that as a whole they maintained purity, holiness, and righteousness.

And so this passage raises a problem for the people. Let's say that they as a people intended to keep the holiness of the nation. What do you do in the situation raised in this passage? How do you maintain the purity and holiness of the nation if you don't know who killed someone? That's what we're talking about. Verse 1 envisions someone being found slain in the Promised Land. Not just dead, but slain; pierced; killed. Presumably murdered. An innocent person was put to death; that's what verses 9-10 talk about; they talk about innocent blood. Innocent blood was shed. For justice to be maintained, for holiness to be maintained, the murderer must be put to death. That's what the law required. But how do you do that if you don't know who killed this person?

By the way, what probably concerns us here in the concept of corporate guilt is that the guilt of a single individual can inflict guilt on the entire nation. That's a tension that's hard to resolve; it just doesn't seem fair to us. Well, it is a tension that's recognized in this passage. It's a tension that God addresses.

You see, the solution actually addresses this tension. It gives the opportunity for the elders of the nearest city to take up responsibility in

this matter. Verses 7-8 shows them make a vow before God that they are personally innocent of this death and that they don't know who committed the crime. By making this vow before the priests it's as if the priests are serving as judges in the matter, receiving this official testimony from the elders of their innocence in all this. This presumes of course that the elders did their own investigation on the matter but the murder remained unsolved. But they stand before the Lord and make it clear that they performed their God given job to root out unholiness among the people; to look to enforce justice. They essentially vow their personal innocence in the matter as representatives of the people. They then appeal to God for atonement.

The word atonement here is a word of covering. They asked that they be covered with regards to this sin. That God would not hold them guilty for it. Verse 8. They call out on behalf of the nation of Israel, "Provide atonement O LORD." The cracking of the heifer's neck is a symbol of what should be done to the murderer if they knew who he was. It instead serves as a means for Israel's own atonement as the elders wash their hands over the dead carcass. The elders represent the people saying that they looked to root out this unholiness from among them, but were unable. They instead petition God to cover up this mark of unholiness on them; to forgive their inability to purify the people and enforce justice. According to this verse, God says that when this process was done, that he would receive it on Israel's behalf as atonement for this sin.

Well, we could definitely spend more time flushing out this passage, but I'd like to begin to think more specifically about how some of the principles here relate to us as Christians under the new covenant. Let me make first an application to the oversight of elders in the church. Israel was a special holy community, and as we are reminded here, they were led in many ways by elders. The church, as a body of believers, is also a holy community, also led by elders. What Israel represented in the old covenant is what the church is in the new covenant; namely the holy people of God. The church is not a political nation, nor just one ethnic people, nor do we live in holy land. Those differences affect how we live this out. But the fact that we are a holy people means that we should look for our body to live in holiness. We should pursue purity in the church and among its members. Specifically for elders, this means they have a responsibility in their leadership to look to promote holiness in the body of Christ. Of course the elders need to do that within the limits prescribed in Scripture. They also need to do it according to the provisions for how holiness is obtained in the new covenant.

And so I'm talking basically about church discipline here. Elders must exercise their God given responsibilities, so that they can stand before God and say that they've been faithful in the tasks given to them. We read earlier in the service from Revelation; we read a letter to the church at Pergamos. That letter talked about how the church shouldn't tolerate those who advocate certain heresies or immoral practices. The same idea is present in several of the other church letters in Revelation. Those churches needed to turn away from those who seek to deviate from holy living or the holy faith. The church today still has that mandate. Passages like these remind us that the church needs, through its elders, to discipline wayward members. If a member stops pursuing holiness in exchange for wickedness or heresy, the church is called to discipline such members. That discipline is headed up by the elders, but it is something that the whole church has an interest in.

We the church are a holy people. This is a distinction now in the new covenant given to the church. It's not a label given to a particular country today; but the church is made up of peoples from all the nations who confess Christ as their Lord and Savior. Of course, that's where our holiness lies. Our holiness lies in the fact that we have been made holy by Jesus Christ, through faith in him. What makes the church holy today is not that we are made up of perfect sinless people. If you look at any member in the church, you'll see that they are not personally holy in terms of their own righteousness. No, each of us have sinned. Apart from Christ, none of us are holy. But when we turn to Christ in faith, he sets us apart. He calls us his own. He puts his Spirit inside us to begin a transformation. That's all a part of what makes us holy; it's why we can be called saints!

So the church, and the elders specifically, don't discipline those in the church because they don't live perfect holy lives. Otherwise, we'd all be disciplined. But, since our holiness doesn't come from our personal worthiness, that'd be contrary to the gospel. The church needs to discipline those members who aren't really believers in the one true gospel. It's only through real saving faith that we are made holy. That's what makes the church holy. When a heretic clearly professes a false gospel, then we know they don't have saving faith. Then we know they aren't holy. The church at that point must separate themselves from that person to promote its holiness and purity, lest someone who is clearly unholy remains connected to them. In the same way, when someone shows by their unrepentant godless living that they don't have a real saving faith, we must separate from them as well. But again, we don't separate from someone just because they are a sinner. If we are made holy only by faith in Christ, then we only look to separate from someone who clearly doesn't have real faith in Christ.

And so, I'm talking about excommunication here. One of the reasons why we excommunicate someone is to promote the holiness and purity of the church; that we'd strive to be connected in the church with those who have been made holy by Christ. Of course, another reason is for the witness of the church; when outsiders see members of the church living in clear hypocrisy to the Christian faith it brings shame on our witness for Christ and confuses outsiders concerning the gospel.

This chapter in Deuteronomy reminds us of this responsibility. The elders here, even in the event of an unsolved murder, are solemnly vowing before God that they have exercised their responsibility in the matter. The elders are swearing before God that they are not ignoring this matter; they aren't turning a blind eye to the murderer. They are swearing that they don't know who killed the person, but are acknowledging that this is crime that incurs bloodguilt. By killing the heifer they confess this crime deserves death. Holiness in Israel's camp was broken by this murder, but they appeal to God to cover them since the elders don't know who to discipline.

Of course this unsolved murder reminds us that this sort of situation will exist in the church. I'm not talking strictly about an unsolved murder. I'm talking about more generally about our holiness as a church. For Israel, their holiness was broken by a murderer not being put to death for his crime. They'd execute this ceremony and God would preserve their holiness by atoning for this sin. And yet that murderer would still be there. In a sense, the nation would still be defiled in actuality, because the murderer would still be there, secretly lurking in their midst. God in his grace through this sacrifice of the heifer would cover this impurity in their midst, but it doesn't take away from the fact that the murderer would still be there.

This points to our reality in the church. We too are a mixed body. That's what Jesus told us in the parable of the wheat and the weeds. We are rightly called a holy community, but that holiness is only through a saving faith in Jesus Christ. Yet, there are some in the church that don't have a real saving faith, but we just don't know who they are. In that parable, the real believers are the wheat. The weeds are those who aren't really believers, but they look like believers. They exist side by side in the church outwardly professing faith in Christ. The elders and the church can't remove weeds that we can't clearly recognize are weeds. Christ's parable even warns us of indiscriminately attempting to pull out the weeds, lest we pull up some of the wheat at the same time.

What this means is that in actuality the visible church is not a completely holy body; we have unholy people in our membership. Unholy in the sense that they are not truly Christian; they are not truly saints; they are not truly those made holy by faith in Christ. And yet the Bible still calls the visible church on earth holy. That's because Christ covers us as a body. Christ's atonement is like the heifer in this passage. It can make the church as a whole holy even while we have to tolerate false believers in our midst; technically that would mar our purity as a church; but Christ's sacrifice is our covering so that we don't share in the corporate guilt for those we don't know are actually false believers.

And so my next application then is a call to the weeds in the church. I'm talking then to people that might be in this church but that we'd have no way of knowing that they are actually weeds not wheat. In this passage, they had no way to know who the killer was. That's the same with weeds in the church; we don't know who they are, otherwise we could pull them out safely. Well in this passage you see that Israel's corporate guilt could be dealt with in this situation. There could be covering for them as the elders make this vow and appeal on their behalf. And yet that covering wouldn't apply to the unknown murderer. The elders vow doesn't represent *them*. The guilty murderer in their midst couldn't say that vow along with the elders. God's covering didn't extend to them individually. Corporately God would cover Israel in this situation, but the individual murderer would still be guilty before God. No human would know their secret; but God would. On the great Day of Judgment, God would bring justice upon them.

Jesus says the same thing will happen for the weeds in the church. If you are a "weed," someone who doesn't really believe in Jesus, trusting your life to him, you might fool everyone else. Yet God knows your heart. A weed might remain in the visible church all their life, but the parable of the wheat and weeds tells us that on the final Day of Judgment, God will judge the weeds. There is no heaven for the weeds; only fiery judgment.

And yet in the new covenant we know there is hope for the weeds. In the Old Testament, if you were this unknown murderer, you'd probably not want to reveal yourself as the murderer. You'd know that it would mean your certain death. It still would have been the right thing to do, but you could understand why someone wouldn't want to reveal this in the old covenant. And yet today if you are a weed, I want to let you know that there is a great hope held out to you. Today, you can be transformed. You can be changed from a weed to wheat. The salvation offered in Jesus Christ is held out to you again today.

In the old covenant, the unknown murderer couldn't join with the elders as they make this vow over the sacrificed heifer. They couldn't plead innocence over the sacrificed animal. And yet think of the one sacrifice of the new covenant. Think of how we see this exhibited in the Lord's Supper. If you are a weed then this is something you've seen probably many times. Instead of vowing innocence over a sacrificed heifer, we plead guilt over the sacrificed Christ.

This is your hope if you are sitting there today as a weed among wheat. You can still find grace and forgiveness in Jesus Christ. You can find the atonement and covering that God's people have found in Christ. If you are a weed, your current state secretly fractures the holiness of this body; even though Christ covers us in grace. And yet if you turn today in real faith in Jesus, you can be transformed into a holy child of God. You can truly join the saints today. If you are a weed, you've enjoyed the benefits of outwardly belonging to God's holy family. If you repent and turn to Christ, you can inwardly and spiritually experience the blessings of belonging to God's holy family. You can experience not just mere external holiness, but real holiness by the Spirit of God entering inside your heart to change you from the inside out.

And so what I'm calling for each of us to do today is to examine your faith. When you come to the communion table, you're called to examine your Christian life. To see if you really are a true believer in Jesus. Use today's message to examine your heart again today. The church won't be able to recognize most of the weeds in our midst. Sometimes you can be fooled yourself. Satan wants to sow false faith. Examine your professed faith. Is it just intellectual faith? Something where you academically know the truth, but you've not really turned from your sin in real repentance and trusted your life to God's plan? Or maybe your faith was just temporary; at first in the excitement of things you had an emotional experience and said that you had become a Christian. Now maybe you are beginning to realize that you haven't really been truly believing and trusting your life to Christ. If you examine your faith today and find yourself a weed, then I urge you to really give your life to Christ today. Repent of your sins. Tell Jesus what's been going on. Ask him to come into your heart and life today; to make you holy; to make you his own; to change you and grow you as his child.

Well, if you do this examination today and pass the test, then I have some application for you as well. If you examine yourself and find yourself in the faith; if you see that you are a Christian, then here's my challenge to you today. Let's look to show the weeds what wheat looks like. When you hear a sermon on the parable of the wheat and weeds, it's usually pointed out how the weeds look like the wheat when they are both young. It's not until harvest time when the wheat is mature that you can clearly tell the difference. Let us then as wheat look to grow into Christian maturity. We can help the weeds recognize that they are weeds by showing what wheat really looks like.

Now I'm not saying we should act holier than thou. That's not how to show yourself as wheat. You show yourself as wheat by looking to live out the gospel. By daily turning by the power of God from your sins. By loving the Lord more and more as shown by how you cultivate your relationship with him. By telling others how you are a sinner saved by grace. As we shine as lights in this world, the different between the wheat and the weeds will become all the more clear. Simply put - live as a Christian faithful to the means of

grace and God will be growing you through these things. As God grows you, others will observe this growth.

Think about that. Sometimes the wheat in a church can be so immature that the weeds can look around and not see any difference between them and anyone else. For example, if the pastor doesn't preach the gospel, but just tells fun stories, how will the weeds know what Christianity is really all about? Or if the weeds look at the members in the church who are wheat, but see only immature wheat, how will they know what their own growth should look like? Let's shine like a light even to those in our midst who might be weeds. Let's look by the power of Christ to grow up into the full stature and image of Christ. Amen.

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